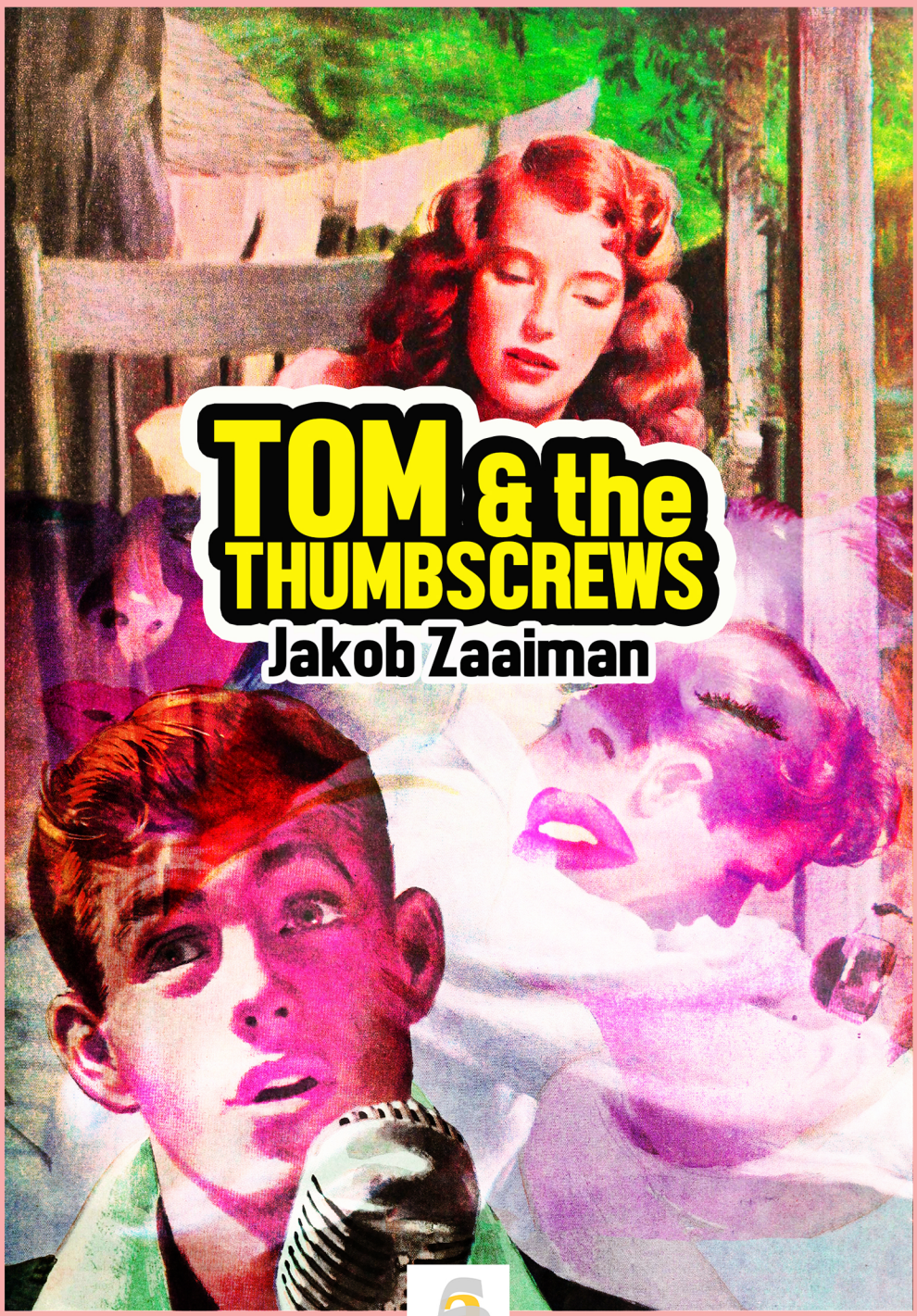

TOM & the THUMBSCREWS

Jakob Zaaiman

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POEMS

JAKOB ZAAIMAN

LONDON
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‘Noise’ a lifestyle

As a teenager in France in the late 1950s,
Daniel said that people everywhere
were obsessed with the idea of
‘flying saucers’.
You couldn’t pick up a magazine or newspaper
and not read about them.
The whole world seemed to be
waiting for something
to happen.

And being a secret oddball himself
- meaning he kept his oddness hidden
as best he could –
he wondered if his unusual thought patterns
were somehow being beamed into his head
from outer space; and that he might possibly have been
selected by aliens for some kind of higher order
conceptual experimentation.

And he came to feel that
his chosen task was to detach himself
from the strivings of everyday life,
and pursue thoughts of a
very singular nature.
Which he did. Very
easily. Thoughts
which penetrated to the very core of things.
Thoughts he found both
natural, and unnatural. Naturally
easy to think, and

impossibly abnormal
at the same time.

Course this isn't the kind of thing
you go around telling all
and sundry. Nobody wants to know,
do they ?
What would people say ? 'That
guy thinks he's been on a
spaceship. What a
fukkin kook.'

His school friends, recently graduated,
(or the equivalent) asked him to join them
in an upcoming bank robbery, and to go from there
into organised crime.
But he said 'no thanks'.
And also about that time, oddly, he had had access
to dynamite (!)
- maybe that's why his friends wanted to
include him in their plans –
and had flirted with the idea of
dynamiting people who were unkind to him, but
we all think like that, so nothing
extra-terrestrial
in there.

Daniel had also thought through
– for any potential interview with the alien
commanding the spaceship –
some questions of his own.
He would ask the insect-like monster
'Do you know what you had me think ?'

And depending on the reply, he could tell
if the creature knew what was going on
 - and what all those thought-beams
were supposed to do -
or if it did not.
And if not, then no need to put the matter right,
because then it would be obvious that
the visiting aliens were just as ordinarily dumb
as the rest of us.

But – in a passing detail –
as I remember the telling of this story,
Daniel didn't mention being troubled
by a sense of impending horror. I'm sure
I would have been.

And a friend of my brother
told my brother he had seen
a flying saucer above
his house in the
suburbs.
It hovered in the sky for
many minutes, 'clear as a bell',
giving him time to have a good look at it
through binoculars.
Then it flew off and disappeared.
I was only a kid at the time, and
if an adult tells you that
another adult has seen a UFO, then
that's a genuine
sighting.

Port Knox

Olga said “I saw you at the station
the other day. It was you. It was identical.
I called out ‘Hello Jakob !’
but it wasn’t you; it was a woman ! Ha !
So I said to her ‘I’m so sorry, I thought you
were my friend Jakob ! And he is
a man !’
And she said to me
‘This happens to me all the time !’
And we both laughed.”

I’m not sure which bit of the tale
these women were laughing at;
it doesn’t make sense.

And I know the station in question,
it’s near Carlton Drive.
And when you get off the train, whether
leaving for town or coming back home, there
are always crowds of people on the
platforms, and so it is always a slow shuffle
to the exit barriers.
You are staring at the back of people’s
heads for a long time.

Once a camera fell out of the backpack
of a Japanese guy in front of me in the queue;
I picked it up, tapped him on the shoulder
and asked ‘Is this yours ?’
He nodded. It was.

He looked grateful, but also
frightened.

It turns out Olga was
suffering from brain cancer, Stage 4.
After the diagnosis, she told me
she spent most of that day and
then every day thereafter quietly
drinking champagne; not in
celebration, but because she thought
'what the heck.'

She handed me a glass as soon as
I walked into her apartment,
but the drink was warm, and just tasted
like a fizzy and watered-down soda.

Then she found an opportunity
to ask me to apply
- in our conversations - the
Buddhist concept of 'skillful means',
but I have no idea what she was
talking about. What is
'skillful means' ? And what's it got
to do with anything ?
What she really wanted me to do was
to sort out her thinking and make her
happy again, but no amount of
skillful means – at least not in my hands – was
ever going to do that.

And she'd been dead
for many months before I even got

to hear, through a
skillful letter
from her lawyers,
about her passing.

Margot & the chair kick

We met at night in an
end-of-terrace house in Putney,
in a front room above a Londis supermarket.

Entry was along a dank, narrow, unlit alley,
and halfway down it you knocked on a
heavy black door to your right.
There may even have been a bell somewhere,
I forget.
Then you waited.
The noise of cars from the street, and the
dead weight of the door meant you were never sure
if someone was coming to open up and let you in,
or not.

Sometimes,
but not always,
Roy himself would appear,
and usher you up some dimly-lit creaky carpeted stairs
past a narrow kitchen
and on to a landing,
and then past an untuned upright piano and some
shelves of stuff and more stuff and then
on into the cavernous front room,
equally dimly-lit and facing the street, and
still with the noise of cars, though their noise
oddly less intrusive now, one floor up.

And there a group of us would
spend the next six hours or so drinking beer,

and talking music, and once,
only once, smoking skunk.
The weed on that one occasion was not
the cherry on a dimly-lit cake
but an unforeseen overdoing it, and a
temporary descent – for me - into a sudden
and frightening nausea.
I was near to throwing up
and expecting to at any second,
though by putting my palms on to the wall
in Roy's squalid 'bathroom',
and standing quite still
with my eyes open,
- never close your eyes -
and gulping down saliva,
the urgency of the impending sickness somehow
went away and I was okay,
thank god for that.

The dimly-lit front room,
and the passages leading to it, and the rooms
leading off from it,
were stacked with tens of thousands of
recorded albums and cds and tapes and
printed music magazines
- much of it still in its original shrink-wrap -
some of it on metal shelving,
some on the carpet, and on tables;
more consumable material than anyone
could meaningfully engage with
- even sampled at the fastest of full speed, and
spread out over the course of
a very long series of very long lifetimes.

But that wasn't the point of it.
Because all this stockpiled junk
was really just a massive 'substantiator',
a visible testament to an apparently
immense and enhancing
involvement in something or the other
– presumably music-related –
guaranteeing to all and sundry that,
come what may, good old Roy
must surely 'know his shit',
and 'know it bastard well',
even though,
when it came down to it,
in plain and simple conversation,
he clearly didn't.
But you don't argue with a house
turned into a warehouse,
because it tells you something,
even when that something is
nothing at all.

So we talked music, and more music,
and more again;
swapping facts, trivia, impressions;
yet always swapping them subtly competitively,
always trying to find a way
to be better informed, and better in control
of composite musical detail,
such as which guitar, which grouping, who knew who,
where were they seen, and who played
where and when;
always trying to be more interesting and
more perceptive

and better informed
and more alert to artful nuance
than the last guy, with his last arcane fact.
My god.

I don't know how many times this went on,
over the decades, perhaps not as often as it felt.
Problem was, these meetings were a mysterious
dead-end, and
I didn't really enjoy any of them,
even though I told myself at the time
that they were somehow important,
and I dare not miss a single one.
I wouldn't do any of it again,
but truth to tell
there isn't going to be
an 'again'.

Which means that slowly,
and steadily, and relentlessly,
all thoughts of time wasted
in that damp and squalid house-warehouse
- with my strange memories of the presence of
'extreme collector-meister' Roy himself -
are beginning to twist themselves into
something quite difficult, and
unwanted.

Méridienne

Now if you look again
and then again and again
at a big glossy colour photograph
say 12 by 7 inches
of a large totally empty room
blindingly brightly lit by arc lamps
dense with pin sharp detail
and crammed full of tables beautifully set
with daffodils and splayed napkins fanning out of
fluted white wine glasses
- yet with not the least sign of life -
it might be that something terrible
has just happened there,
or was just about to.

Someone I knew at university
became a Christian missionary to
Muslims in the south of France, and besides
not letting me have a contact address
or letting me ask questions,
went totally 'off grid', and vanished, and
the only photographs I could find online
vaguely relating to his group, and
probably not even that
- truly -
were shots of deserted rooms
and snaps of clusters of people
with their faces turned away
from the camera.

And while working on the night shift
in a café in Soho
I once heard the boss discuss
with the other staff
the details of
another catering contract for
an upcoming wedding,
(or some such)
a few days away,
and listening to them talk left me feeling
oddly left out
of an event I had absolutely no interest in
being a part of,
to begin with.

And a day or two after
the event itself,
we were all handed big
glossy colour photographs
- to take home and keep, yay -
of a blindingly brightly lit hall
packed tight with beautifully set tables,
all crammed with napkins, flowers,
snowy white tablecloths,
name place cards, daffodils, gold and silver cutlery;
the whole scene loaded with
imminence and expectation;
yet with not a soul in sight;
not so much as the merest shadow on the carpet
or on the side of a table
of whoever it was who
took the picture.

Or just maybe it's because these people
whose faces you can't see –because they
don't want you to know who they are –
get up to things
where their lives would be in mortal danger if
outsiders knew who and where they were;
so the nearest they will allow you to
get to them is a shot of
an empty room
where they might possibly have been,
or might possibly not have.
And were they in the picture,
you can be sure
that you wouldn't be able
to see their faces,
and you wouldn't
be able to work out
anything about anyone, even if
you wanted to, or
whether or not you felt the least part of it
in the first place, or just
oddly left out
of all the fun.

Burn Buried

One night,
while cadging a lift off a
friend of a friend, and
four of us ending up cramped in a small car:
three nondescript guys, plus Candy
- a sexy and attractive teenage girl in
a very encouraging way -
with the workday behind us, and all of us going back to
our respective digs,
scooting along with no particular urgency,
my friend Hal suddenly began an oddly
uncalled-for attack
on Candy, who was in the front seat opposite him,
calling her a 'fuck slut' who
gave a fuck to anyone and everyone,
anytime,
whenever and wherever and whatever
the circumstance.
He seemed upset.
The key idea being that, in his mind,
Candy's behaviour was depraved, and
that sexual depravity in a girl
'is not a good thing'.

Read the literature:
Shakespeare. Milton. Stalin.
Bob Dylan, the Bible; going from
a 'general general' rule, to
the very specific.

Candy looked only very slightly taken aback,
though the 'boyfriend', next to her, doing the driving,
didn't seem bothered at all.
I thought, what brought this on ?
I thought, what's this about ?
And where is it suppose
to go ?

All I could do was picture Candy's bush
– though I'd never actually seen it –
although I would have
loved to have - and I know from the sight
of her face that it was going to be
a really good one.

Well, psychoanalysis tells us that
anger is really just frustration –
but the whole world has always known that,
since at least the days of cave paintings,
if not earlier –
and Hal knew that everyone else knew that, so
to prove that he wasn't just another
sick sad sick sack, he
told us that he was well aware of the idea that,
truth was, all he really wanted was a Candy fuck –
like everybody else - but
truth was, he wasn't getting one;
though, as he explained it, the real truth was
that he didn't really want one, and never did, and that
he wasn't interested in her physically,
he only really wanted Candy
'to behave',
and our whole little world would be

a better place for it.
Freud telling the truth to Freud, and telling it
by means of Freudianism.

But none of this changes anything, because
'showing-that-you're-knowing'
you are ill doesn't suddenly make you well. And
'showing-that-you're-denying'
doesn't cancel the facts you
had to face to begin with. It just has a way
of filling everyone
with a vague sense of loss,
alongside a disheartening sense of
the deep futility of
all things
human.

Half a slice of toast – what happens to the other half ?
Does it fall to the floor,
'jam side' down ?
Not necessarily.

More to the point, Candy's sure to be still be out there,
somewhere, and still strutting her stuff with
Candy abandon, although, by now, she
will have had plenty of time to go
easy on all that fucking,
if that's what she wanted
to do, and thought it
best, who knows.

MG Pegasus

I really like the idea of
an unattended funeral,
always have done, always will.
Poorly attended funerals are often
central events in some of the many
movies I've seen.
But I really like the idea of a totally empty room, and
a vacant tomb, and a
deserted sepulchre, an empty chapel,
and a nothingness.
The idea of a body with no audience in attendance,
lying in a tasteless stateless state,
and perhaps not even a body there
to begin with.
And not a soul turns up, maybe
not even the necessary 'staff',
if that's what they're called,
I mean the priests, the undertakers, the pall bearers,
the crematoriana, the exorcists,
the angels, the ambulance chasers,
and the rest.

So just imagine the date set, the slot booked,
the interested parties informed, and
the preparations made,
then zero.
Zilch.
Zorba.
Zapata.
Nothing happens.

That's it.
Stillborn. DOA. A&E. FBI.
Everyone forgets, and makes excuses,
something's come up,
last minute crisis, I'm in a 'domestic',
got stuck in traffic, forgot it was this week,
got a roaring migraine,
have to have urgent sex, got the galloping trots,
and so on.
The unbelievable barely-believable
fat white pretence.
An empty chapel; a deserted space, not a soul.
Just can't be bothered, is the truth.
Just can't be 'fooking' bothered.
Then maybe after a while the priest looks at his watch,
and then scratches his lubricated anus distractedly,
and maybe then the undertaker makes a face,
and raises his eyebrows at the priest,
and all the others start to worry they're
not going to be paid,
or maybe the whole mob – priest and all –
have to be paid up front,
and so don't care one way or the other
if nothing happens.
Then maybe after a bit, everyone disperses,
and goes back to their baskets,
and gets ready for the next gig, the next slot.

As you can see, I don't know much about these crucial
rites of passage.

So when my friendless friend Gordon died,
his good friend Richard the

‘irritable wandering Jew’ arranged everything,
giving me the date:
Golders Green Crematorium, next Friday, or
Tuesday, or Monday, or Wednesday,
Thursday or Saturday,
or maybe it was some other day,
if you want to attend.
It’s so long ago, now; so long ago.
Now the thing is,
whenever I contacted him by phone, Gordon
always made me feel
that I was interrupting something,
and getting in his way, and making
a bit of a nuisance of myself,
so when he died I said to myself,
‘Fuck you, Gordon, you can die on your own;
and even though you’re already dead,
don’t let me get in your way, you old cold chum.’
So, what do you know, I didn’t go to Golders Green;
nor did I feel bad about not having gone.
Because even though he didn’t have any friends,
Gordon knew loads of people,
like all that lot from the Festival Hall, and the Wigmore,
and the Royal Opera House, the ENO, and the Barbican.
They were sure all sure to be there.
Though later I spoke to some of them,
and what do you know,
they hadn’t gone either,
and more than a few didn’t even know
poor old dead Gordon had died.
Maybe even Richard the organising Jew
didn’t bother to turn up on the day,
though I think that somewhat unlikely, though that

in itself would have been
a bloody good laugh.

Well, anyway, I'm not going to be having a funeral,
that's for sure for sure.
I'm not going to be trundled up to Golders Green
in a wheelbarrow. I'm not going to assemble
a bored and reluctant congregation.
I'm not going to have taped music
(Wagner & Black Sabbath)
blasting out of the tannoy, even if
they have a sound system in the crematorium.
I'm not going to have anything sentimental
read out, sob, sob, we loved him, bwaa, sniff,
no we didn't, who was he anyway,
the tight bastard, never had any money, but
let's not get his name wrong.
Nobody will be attending.
There'll be no piss-up afterwards. Not a drop.
Buy your own fucking grog
and load yourself up at home,
because Gordon never bought me
so much as a lubricated peanut.
Empty room. Empty sepulchre. Vacant tomb.
Only the unrecognisable gardener for company.
Just like Gordon, I'm going to be dying
myself dead to death
right on my own
lonesome.

Kennith Zenith

They all took up seats in
my dining-room, a girl at the table with me,
the others in chairs placed nearby.
A mother, two big teenage sons, a
divorced daughter-in-law, and a
lively grandson, aged 8.
It seemed a bit cramped, as it's not
a big room.
And I wasn't sure the best way
to get things going.

'Well then let me show you over the house,' I said,
after an awkward pause.
So we all got up, and I led them upstairs.
I had straightaway to make excuses
for the flaking plaster and the patches
of damp, and the cracks right down
the walls and across the ceilings, as well as
the badly worn carpets.
Put simply, the place looked a shitfarm.
But I assured them that, with a few tins of paint,
I could soon put things right.
No one said anything.
And I didn't pick up a sense of
growing dismay.
They were working it all out
for themselves, doing their
own very careful calculations.
Going back downstairs was a much easier sell,
and then we returned to our places

in the dining-room.

The mother and the sons began speaking to one another
in lowered voices, and in Portuguese, so
I couldn't follow, but it was obvious they were
running through the options.
'Do you cook here ?' the mother then asked me,
glancing towards the kitchen, and wanting
to know if my live-in presence was
going to get in their way, as they clearly
planned on taking over the whole house, and
making use of every available living space.
I nodded.
They were making it plain that, day and night,
there would always be someone doing something
in the kitchen, and there would always be
drop in guests and relatives huddled
in sleeping bags and mattresses
on the floors, and there would be
comings and goings at all hours.
The hall light would likely never
be turned off.

The 'boys' said they planned on parking their
motorbikes in the alley, and so avoiding having to
apply for parking permits; the grandson would
keep his toys in the box room. The mother would
have the large room near the front door, so that she
could keep an eye on things.
And so on. And on.
I felt I was being quietly written out of the script,
from which there would be no coming back,
once they had all actually

moved themselves in. These five bodies
in my tiny dining room were
only the start.

They waited for me to speak.
'Okay, well, you think about it,' I said,
drawing our 'session' to a close.
Then the divorced daughter-in-law, who had been
sitting and staring fixedly at me all the while,
and not saying a single word,
suddenly stood up and, accidentally on purpose,
slammed her elbow
into one of the framed pictures on the wall
next to her, knocking it to the floor.
The glass didn't break, but the event said
all that needed to be said.
I knew right away that she didn't
want to live in this house, hadn't
warmed to me, and
hadn't liked
what she had been shown.

Weeks went by, and then a
voicemail message, calling the
whole thing off.
No problem.
Because I was dreading the invasion, knowing
I was effectively going to be kicked out of my
own house, despite my still wanting
to try to live
in it.

The end.

No. Because it occurs to me now,
ten years too late - because
I'm wholly blind to this kind of thing
at the time, and in the moment -
that the divorcee girl had,
in her staring at me fixedly silently,
and in her knocking the picture off the wall,
been nursing a separate plan of her own. Effectively
she was knifing me hard in the ribs, hoping I would
wake the shitfuck up, and maybe
- hoping against hope -
help her out.

Next Beach On Along

He was a nice guy, this
'memory man'.
A sweet face.
I only met him once, but
I remember the way he looked at me:
longingly, with a touch of wistfulness, as if
he wasn't quite sure he knew
who I was, but that he
hoped that - all the same - I might
be able to supply the details that he
felt were out there
somewhere, but
which he also felt
he could not quite get
his head round.

I can't remember his name
- so that's a good start –
but a bad motorbike crash had
badly damaged his ability to remember
anything, from memories of even
the simplest features of the recent past, to
even the simplest features of the right now present;
so a friend helpfully suggested he
stick bits of paper
to key things about the house,
so as to remind
himself what he needed to know about
what he needed to know, to know
about pretty much anything, and

everything.

So, for example, there was
the cat.
Definitely a ‘the cat’.
Whose cat, and
what was its name, and where did
it come from ? The cat was apparently called
Suzy - so one of the pieces of paper on the fridge said -
yet somebody must have given Suzy
to him, but who was that, and why
had they done so ? Maybe it was a ‘Suzy’
who gave him the cat, but then what
was the cat’s name, and who
was Suzy ? And who could he
ask ? And what would he
ask them ?

And of course there was also a big
fat notebook, packed with information
about information, as well as
packed with clever ways to
relate everything to everything else,
but the key to it all was finding a way to hold down a
fact long enough so that you could
connect it to a network of other facts,
and so be able to inch yourself slowly forward,
step by step, inch by inch, fact by fact, backward
into the sticky reality of the real world of
everyday life itself.

Okay.

So we could start with ‘Suzy’,
definitely a ‘the cat’, but
then what. And
then what then.

Skooling on sundaes

She was a beautiful silver-blond girl,
not exactly Swedish but not exactly not either,
married to a most likeable guy,
widely considered
handsome, upright and decent.
So far so good.
But after fifteen years or so of marriage
they divorced;
and she soon married again,
this time to an 'unknown'
who had not really registered with anyone,
least of all me.
I knew nothing about the divorce,
so of course I didn't know
anyone had been replaced by someone else.
And it turns out this unregistered guy
- essentially a ghostly cipher -
was not a happy chappie either,
so after a year or two, and
despite his beautiful but
not exactly not Swedish wife,
he went and killed himself
by jumping in front of a train.
Jesus fuck.

Truth was, is, she was slowly losing
her not Swedish not magnificence,
and turning instead into something
desiccated and grim.
The flesh had been slipping away from her cheeks, and

her eyes had been sinking into their sockets.
She became a challenging sight, difficult
to look at, and impossible to reconcile
with how lovely she had previously been.
So maybe he topped himself because
she began to look so ghastly,
or maybe she looked like that
because he was sinking
into lunacy.

But as far as I knew, she was still
beautifully married
to the nice guy everyone liked to look of,
so when anyone asked me
how they were getting on,
I would say that this nice guy had
inexplicably committed suicide,
jumping meaninglessly and worthlessly
- and perhaps wordlessly -
in front of a train.
'Oh, the damn fool !' they would all say,
emphatically. 'The damn fool.'
And yes, you had to agree,
what a damn fool, and what
a waste by train
of such a nice guy life,
and what a vicious blow to his
not Swedish but not exactly not Swedish either
slowly beautifyingly unravelling wife.

But then one of these people I had been
explaining all this to
contacted the nice guy's mother,

and through discreet inquiries discovered
that the nice guy is absolutely fine, and doing well, and
has just taken a new job in Dubai, and so
not at all the wasted damn suicide fool
I had been going around telling people about
all along.

That didn't make sense to me,
as death means dead, surely,
- whatever the criteria you're applying -
whether suicide by train, or suicide
by cop, or whether you're
tucked up under your duvet
with pills and a pistol.
How on earth do you get from there
to Dubai, for godsake ?
Obviously what had happened was that
I had been telling people that
the first husband had died, when
in truth it was number two.
Interestingly, I've descended into this
uninvited lunacy before
- and more than once -
confidently declaring someone dead
when it turns out they're standing next to me.
I remember working in an office
and taking a phone call in which the caller
asked to speak to someone there and
I said 'I'm afraid not, he's dead',
but the caller said no, he can't be,
I was just talking to him a moment ago;
just put him on, please.

And nothing whatsoever to do
with any of the above, but a friend of mine
- chance in a million coincidence -
used to live in Cranley Gardens,
north London, the exact same street as
serial killer Dennis Nilsen, though
at the time of Nilsen's arrest
not one of us hosers thought to ask him
if he had been able to smell
- from his house, or when he might
have been standing in the street -
the stench of Nilsen's chopped up
victims' body parts
rotting to stink in the drains.
And o yes I've just remembered this friend
telling us at work one day that someone
cut the brake cables on his pushbike.
And it's all steep hills in his area !
Couldn't have been Nilsen; he was
already under arrest, I think.

Ox café

Most international flights have at least
one or two loaded coffins in the hold.
(Uncommon knowledge)

'My mum and dad,' he said
handing me a bundle of closely-typed pages
in a battered cardboard folder.
'Dick and Joan' it read in capital letters
in marker pen on the pale blue cover
– though not their real names, you understand,
which were more like names from yesteryear
like 'Marjorie and Cuthbert' –
yet real people all the same,
with a real story to tell,
finding one another on an island in the southern seas,
and getting married and starting a family,
as in a fairy story,
only the truth in truth more prosaic
and ordinarily everyday,
with much less fairy to it,
when you sat back and thought about it,
and why wouldn't you.

It's never the words
that tells you the story:
it's always in the telling
of it.

'Tally ho !' said the Spitfire pilot, flying low,
way too low, tally ho;

and so flying straight into the unfriendly friendly fire
from the warships guarding the Arctic convoy.
And so, tally ho,
ending up corkscrewing straight into
the inky drink of the North Sea.
Bandit down, but no bandit, and
not really downed, tally ho !
And this his second lost Spitfire, after
a previous accident in training,
- if you're counting, and you can't help yourself not to -
after which the others – other fighter pilots –
didn't want to talk to him, he said,
we can't afford losses like this at times like these,
- this is WW2 for christsake - what the fuck
are you playing at ?
All of which made him fly low, way too low,
between the ships, at about deck height,
showing that he was a gutsy little fighter pilot,
and not the accident-prone clown people
were starting think he might be.

Course it wasn't long before he was down again
somewhere else,
probably accidentally crashing straight into Germany,
or into another Arctic convoy,
or whatever,
never to be seen again.
One man, three Spitfires, and no enemy losses,
if you're counting,
and really you can't help not to,
even if you don't want to,
distantly, inadvertently
wherever you are,

maybe in the shower, or driving to work;
and letting the WW2 fighter pilot story wash over you.
'They took my dear darling boy,' cried mum
Joan Jean Jane out loud
again, a second time,
when she read her printed form letter
of condolence from the King.
The Royal Air Force had already
given her the bad news in person
some weeks earlier.

'He was a good brother to me,' he said,
'and as a boxer in the military he took me
running training.'
Actually really only once, as it turned out,
because I couldn't keep up with him
so it was a complete disaster,
and we never ran together again;
and of course after that he was
missing in action and
gone for good.

The stuff about idiocy was not on the page,
- it never is -
but it was
in the telling all the same,
as it somehow always manages to be.

He was a good brother to me
(perhaps because I never knew him)
(and because I never spent any time with him)
(and because he was killed as a war hero before
he could bring his idiocy home to us.)

Given the opportunity,
he would most likely have crashed
yet another Spitfire into our family house
and killed us all.

And on international flights,
there are at least one or two coffined bodies
just beneath your feet
in the hold, in truth,
on their way
back home.

Address coding

Thirty years later,
and here we are
sorting books and packing them
into cardboard boxes for the charity shop,
generating
a very real sense of an ending,
with the emptying of the shelves,
and the sound of books scraping against the cardboard
and the discussion about which books might be kept,
and for whom,
though as it happens
no one wants any of them.
I hold up a book on Corfu, and
my brother-in-law says
'You can see the student phases right there:
olive picking in Greece,
Tibetan Buddhism,
strict vegetarian cooking,
Teach Yourself VD,
Cuba, Paraguay, Kundalini,
and How to play the Sitar.'

Well, yes.
You can. Plain for all to see.
So the books get to go into the boxes
vaguely in their groupings;
alongside some Russian dictionaries,
a Catholic breviary,
Fodor guides, Penguin Classics,
and the other books about nothing

that anyone really wanted to know
in the first place; all done with now,
and no use to their owner in his late middle age,
wherever he was, is;
likely stumbling foolishly around
the snowy wastes of Canada or somewhere,
supposedly having achieved nothing much
with his life, thanks presumably
to the energy wasted
on all the daft student phases
he went through.

'You can see' means we all can see that it's better not
to have had phases of any sort to begin with,
causing the buying and shelving and discarding of
dozens of exciting-sounding books on exotic subjects;
better to have been another kind of person altogether
– someone who played it safe, someone who
incarnated 'phaselessness' – someone not given to
dementing themselves with absurdist life-plans,
involving banishment to weirdness in
Arctic Canada, or was it Lapland.
(Sweden.)
Better instead to be quietly packing up someone else's
abandoned and forgotten books
in a cardboard box, for someone else
to forget about,
I forgot.

Throat of Water

Lolly liked to open the door to me
- and probably to everyone else as well –
with supposedly alarming news of some description,
stuff like a disaster 'only
just averted', or a situation needing
immediate action,
like her daughter Molly just having nearly had
a bad accident playing in the park, and
falling out of a swing and nearly
cutting her head open in two; or
something equally important missed through
unforeseen and unavoidable
things happening right out of
nowhere, and turning
everything into sudden panic
and confusion.

Her bathroom was
behind her daughter's room, so
you had to go through that
room to reach it.
'Molly's cross-legged on the floor in the dark,'
I said when I got back. 'In the corner.'
Lolly nodded. 'Probably having a quiet moment.'
She paused, adding in a lowered
but not unkindly voice,
'I think she might be a bit stupid.'
Though she didn't use the word 'stupid',
softening it instead with the much
nicer sounding word

‘obtuse’.

And little Miss Molly used to grin foolishly at me
whenever I saw her on her own, so
I couldn’t help but ponder the concept ‘obtuse’.
But she’s now a PhD from Oxford, teaching
film theory in Dublin, and with a number of
university press books to her name, so
perhaps not quite
so stupid after all.

Then one day Lolly told me
the frightening story of
how she was lying in bed alone one night when
she moved her leg down the side of the bed along
the tucked-in sheet part, when she
suddenly felt a chunk of
something fleshy lodged in the groove there, and
when she pushed her other leg towards
the centre of the bed she
felt a hefty weight taking up the
space next to her, and
in an instant said to herself o
jesus christ there’s a
strange man lying right here
next to me what the christ
am I going to do, jesus, so
she lay there in a panic for a few seconds, but
of course this was all nonsense and
there wasn’t anyone there, yet
she still wanted to convey to me in vivid detail
her mounting sense of horror at
this unknown figure lying right there

next to her, pushing
her to the edge of the bed, and jesus christ
what was going to happen then.

Actually the truth was
I had the hots for Lol, but I really
didn't think I could put up
for very long with
her unending imaginary everyday panicking,
though maybe
that was exactly what she
wanted me to do, to help her put an end
to the uselessness of
her endless empty imaginings.

Three Latin

While I was walking quickly up the hill
towards the underground station, I saw
coming down towards me, some yards away,
Rebecca, the girlfriend of the guy
in the flat above a place where I worked.
The two of them owed me money;
not a lot – true – but some;
perhaps not enough to get into a
scrap about.
But their plan was suddenly to
disappear as soon as their flat
was sold, and so avoid
having to pay me a nickel.
I wasn't going to confront her
in the street, but she
must have thought otherwise.

She saw me.

'Have you sold the flat ?' I asked, as we
approached. They were my only words.
Right away she said, 'I'm not her.
I'm her sister.'
Wrong footed and confused, I said to her,
'What ? Her sister ? That's amazing.'

Once, a pipe burst in the floor in
Rebecca's flat and water flooded
the ceiling lights of our
workspace below. Rebecca told me to

speak to her dad, and he
managed to make it appear to be
our fault, not theirs. He did this by
positioning himself, in our conversation,
– and from the start, using his tone of voice –
as the injured and slightly irritated
party. Some people can do that; it's a
useful skill.

Rebecca told the repairman
who called round later
that her family no longer
celebrated Christmas, because
many years ago
her one and only brother had
been killed in a freak accident
on Christmas day.
Huh.
It doesn't ring true somehow
– it feels way overcooked –
but why the hell would anyone
make that up ? Perhaps
because I'm not her,
and I'm not her sister,
I'm the brother.

Key plaster

‘What happened to ‘thingy’ ?’ she asked me,
– in passing – in the street.
‘Thingy’ was Alex, a previous lodger,
who had lived in her Spanish mother’s
Spanish boarding-house for 25 years, and
whose name she – and others, including her mother –
somehow never really came to grips with.
As it was, no one at the house ever called him
‘Alex’, and her mother - the landlady proper –
mainly called him ‘deh boy’, and some of the
other lodgers called him, semi-satirically,
‘chappie’, which became corrupted, via
Andalusian Spanish, into ‘jar’, the ‘-ppie’ bit
deemed unnecessary.
The Old Boy of the house – Manolo – in his late 80s
but forever looking about 50,
told me that Andalusians couldn’t be bothered with
more than a couple of syllables for a word, and
so would always try to reduce
English words into their merest components,
so ‘sandwich’ would become ‘sar-we’, and
‘thousand’ – ‘fa-fa’.
So ‘Jar’ was, if you like, Alex’s official name
in the house, but no one outside this inner circle –
like neighbours and visitors –
had much idea who the name referred to.

Thingy had a complicated life story – past and present –
and in his last incarnation before moving on and out,
had decided to become ‘an artist’.

That he knew nothing
about 'art' - or really about anything else –
did not concern him in the least,
because his ideas of 'what was what in the world' were
generated entirely from within. So he bought himself a
boxful of stuff – paints and canvasses and –
mysteriously – complex colour charts -
and began to paint.

The most interesting thing about his paintings,
I soon found, was the – to me – unbelievable disparity
between the relatively straightforward
imagery on display, and Thingy's explanation
of what they were supposed
to represent; and what, in turn, these depictions
were supposed 'to mean' in themselves.
There really was no clear connection
between any of them at all.
Nothing; not a drop.
A church building turned out to be a death camp;
a pigeon a paedophile, a table a Bible.
And it wasn't ever a simple matter of one-to-one
decoding, however improbable:
each picture was a springboard,
via Jar's explanation, to
an impossibly convoluted interpretative narrative,
lasting ten to twenty minutes, at least,
sometimes more.

Not a problem.
Because after quite a short time
a small south London gallery
just off Fulham Road offered him

–in a substantial achievement on its own –
a slot in a very uneven group exhibition, and
when I visited the display itself,
right near its closing, the only works
that had been sold by then
were those by the mighty Jar, and he had managed
to sell absolutely everything he had submitted:
all twelve 2'x1' oils.
Astonishing.
A story of itself, in its own way.

So when she asked me about 'Thingy',
I told her about the art,
and about the amazing sales at the exhibition.
But try as I might, I couldn't compact
the story into the half sentences she wanted,
as the whole saga required a bit of
contextual background. But I stuck
to the point, I didn't ramble. Yet when
I glanced at her face
to see how she was taking it,
I was shocked by her look of dismay, her
look of horror, at having to listen to any
of it, when all she really wanted was a
forgettable one word answer.
I could see what she was thinking:
'Why are you unloading all this
shit on poor little me, for christsake ?
Call off your fucking dogs !
I've got a life to live !'

I've seen that look a few times since,
when I tell people stuff. So now I've stopped

the ‘after dinner speaking’ completely.
Perhaps I go on too long; perhaps
my stories are not as interesting as I think
they are. Perhaps the people I know
really don’t care about anything
other than nothing, and their
supposed enquiries about other people
are as formally polite as they can be
without having to be ‘bored to death’
by other people, and without
being bored to the point where
they have to turn around and walk away
from you in the middle of one of those
interminably boring explanations of yours,
as has already happened to me
a few times already.

Tin Slip Silver

'Father grieved at wrong grave for 30 years.'
[News headline]

Today, bright summer and sunny,
I'm going to get out of this bloody house and
visit the grave of 'X'
- let's leave the name blank for now -
and pay my full respects.
It'll be a very famous figure, this 'X' person,
likely a pop star, or a show business celebrity,
or a celebrity do-gooder,
– perhaps Elvis –
definitely a big name of sorts
who, if anyone ever did, and does,
deserve a big good casket in a massive crypt
– a la Napoleon –
in a good big posh cemetery,
it would be one of them.
Elvis, that is; I'm still talking about Elvis here.
And by 'good cemetery' I mean
one with well-tended paths
and cut lawns, and fragrant flowers and
creepy statuettes, all
overseen by a well-informed attendant
in 24/7 liveried attendance.

But they're not dead yet, this 'still alive' person,
though they soon will be, surely.
We all die in the end, they say,
so let's go with that.

And why not visit the grave in advance ?
Why not tell them how much you love them
while they're still alive ?
Why not just go ahead and do it,
while you still have the precious time ?
You're not going to get me caught short
on that one.

That's all well and good, but where do you start ?
With a list of local celebrity cemeteries, obviously.
I might be tempted to choose one nearby,
just around the corner, in strolling distance,
and a stone's throw as the crow flies,
but that would be so selfish,
so self-obsessed and egotistical.
A better idea would be to go for somewhere grand,
like the 'Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea
Stately Burial Grounds Solely
for Genuine Blue Blood Royalty,
Listed Media Celebrities,
and the Ostentatiously Wealthy only'
if such a place even exists,
though I very much doubt it.
Why would it ? Why would you build
a death house with a name like that ?

But if it did,
you would take the tube to South Ken,
turn left at the exit up the stairs, and,
at the first available café
avail yourself of a decent cup
of strong French coffee
among all the Frenchified ex-France French,

bonjour, and let the whole funereal enterprise
take care of itself.

That's it in a nutshell.

Yet, as it was,
I spent the whole day wandering around South Ken,
and World's End,
and Gloucester Road, but
I never did find my special grave,
or even see Elvis,
or even locate the bastard cemetery
he was supposed to have been cremated in.
It was as if all the stinking celebrity coffins
had been swept away
in some kind of 'Total Biblical Tsunami
of Grave Robbing'.
What meaninglessness !
Damn the useless people misdirecting me !
Damn the idle gravediggers, and
grave robbers and grave-wasters.

To which there can only be one conclusion: that
maybe if I'd planned the day better,
and paid more attention
to the little things, and to all those tiny details,
and told those people that I loved them
while they were still alive,
and so on, and so forth,
I might not have wasted a goodly portion of
that lovely sunny summer afternoon.

I won't be doing any of this again;

at least, not before I do this
kind of thing again
the next time.
Love you all, dear people,
don’t you be dead
already !

Three Studies for a Figure

3

I go to bed late, and
from my kitchen window downstairs I often see
lights on in the houses opposite;
little orange and yellow squares
floating above me in the darkness.
And I like to guess what people are up to
- in those early hours -
behind those colourful shapes,
but not knowing
which room is being used for what,
I can never be sure.

Except that the bathroom window
in the converted loft
used to be lit up for long periods
at two a.m. or later;
so I took it that 'big tits' had bladder trouble,
or something of
that sort.

And when she was moving in to that flat
for the first time,
and ferrying stuff she had laid out
on the roof of her car,
I happened to be passing her in the street
and she smiled familiarly at me,
as if we were old friends, and also
as if she were well used to dealing

- in the moment, and all the time -
with unknown men.
And this was long before the big tits show in
her spare room.

2

What happened was that,
after a month or two,
every other night at about half past ten
big tits, naked from the waist up,
would appear at her first-floor window,
getting ready for bed;
sometimes on the phone
sometimes just pacing about thoughtfully;
- but never bothering to look out,
or to cover herself up -
looking good with her maroon red dyed hair,
sometimes stacked up in a towel turban,
sometimes just clumped together
in a big plastic hair clip;
she had a friendly face with a nice big nose
to go nicely with those
nice big wobbly pink tits.

Were those tits intended for me ? Maybe,
but I'll never know now, sad, too bad.
I once had a plan, involving
knocking on her door and asking
if the pussycat I'd seen on the windowsill was hers.
She would know my story was nonsense, and laugh,
but so what, life itself is nonsense,
and I'd be in there with a chance.

Because as it was
the sight of those big wobbly pink
freshly washed tits had started yearnings,
and longings and confusions in me.
And I already had had her
smiley invitation.

1

Again, were those tits directed at me,
or for everyone else
who just happened to see ?
They were sure to be for free.
And was that a Francis Bacon print
on the wall behind her ?
'The Buggers' ?
I liked to think so
though the chances were less than zero
and I certainly wasn't going to
settle the question
with binoculars. If it had been
a Bacon, I'd have
knocked on that
door.

Guest to Sugars

So is a 'death speech' – a eulogy –
supposed to be riveting,
and engrossing,
and packed with action and colour
and lifetime achievement,
with youthful tales of Zulus and spears
and the Himalayas ablaze,
and the crackle of musket fire ?

This particular gathering was meant to celebrate a
long and successful life, but instead the whole thing
turned out to be drab, underpowered,
disappointing,
and unnecessary.
A waste of a day, because it also involved
hours of travel 'to and from'.
A day wasted on the road for
the dead.

Who sits where: I think I must have been
shown to a pew by someone, I don't remember.
The air in the church was cold, and
we were gathered in an odd semi-darkness -
and this made it feel that the event itself
was somehow second division, and not worth even
a minimum effort, like say that of
'switching the lights on', or 'warming the place up'.
Yes you could read your stupid little hymnbook, and
make out the solemn faces across the aisle, but
the whole building felt dark and neglected,

medieval even, though without
the goblets of mead, the flaming torches and the
roasting meat,
and Henry the 'vee one one one th'.
Perhaps there was a more important occasion later on,
like after lunch, and admin were cleverly
'saving up' for that.
I can't even remember flowers for the dearly departed,
or for our 'Dearly Beloved',
but there surely must have been some,
somewhere.

Added to which the acoustics were hopeless, combining
muffle and echo and boom; and there being no form of
electric amplification, it made listening to what was said
a real effort.
The deceased's 'best friend' gave the main address, and
though he had spiced it with
requisite moments of dry legal wit
- delivered in a monotonous deadpan -
it felt like the jokes had been carefully cleansed
of anything vaguely worth laughing at.

Then his son, watery-eyed, took
to the lectern, to read us a passage
from the scriptures.
But his voice had no carrying power, and so
phrases were lost, and it was difficult to
keep up, and easier just to pray for his whole
unnecessary intervention
to come to an end. And then he ended with
'Here endeth the lesson',
- that bit I did catch -

which seemed a little odd. Do you
get to get taught something at a funeral ?
Presumably yes, and
the son must have thought so.
Presumably in this case ours was a lesson in
lacklustre event planning, and in how to trouser a fee
without lifting a finger.
Or had the boy gone back
to his schooldays
– this being a college chapel –
and he just couldn't think how else best
to sign his reading off.
Perhaps he could have looked up and shouted
at the rafters
'Did you get any of that, Dad, given
where you are now ?' and
'Feeling comforted by those biblical verses, Dad ?' or
'Is any of this relevant to you in
your current predicament, Dad ?'
and this might have made up
for a least a few of
the many jokes lost in the
tiresome speechmaking.

So say all of us.

Toast beef

Glen had broken his glasses:
a pair of thick stolid
magnifying glass-type lenses
set in thick black plastic frames that
let him see beyond the blur that
his eyes ordinarily told him was
the world.

I mentioned to him that,
on my day off, I planned on
walking to Richmond Park,
to 'check it out', though of course, what else is
there do to there, though
Richmond Park though
'close', was many miles away, maybe
an hour's walk:
he said, excitedly, emphatically,
he would come with me,
go with me,
yes I'll go with you,
he said.

But just days before the
day we set out, his glasses
broke – the frame snapping
at the nose and they
couldn't be repaired – so he was
effectively blinded, and had to
stare closely and intensely at
ordinary objects about the house

even to identify them,
but he decided he would solve the problem
of his blindness in the park
by taking along a pair of
powerful binoculars,
not for birdwatching or plane spotting,
but just to be able to see
anything at all.

And as we strode out along
the backstreets towards the park,
his binoculars round his neck
as if he were a
wartime air raid lookout,
Glen chatted away animatedly
and confidently as if
immersed in the idea that
the whole undertaking was
wonderfully meaningful, this
walking, and this whole 'going
to the big park' thing, as an existential
activity, very visibly granting meaning
to life, meaning his life, my life,
all life. Going to the park.

But all I can now remember
of the experience itself
was Glen,
when he wanted to take a closer look
at something, rather than using his binoculars
– which were no use for things nearby, and
in the end
of no real use on the park walk at all –

would drop noisily to the ground, and
then, lying on his side, and
scissoring his legs this way and that,
adopt a kind of
optimal observational closeness,
his face pressed right up next
to a plant, or a tree stump,
or shrub, or an indeterminate object,
so that he could get
a good look at it, and then
take it all in.

There were loads
of other people around, so it was kind of
disturbing to have him regularly
falling to the ground and writhing about,
having a psychotic episode perhaps, or
perhaps convulsing epileptically, or perhaps
just another British idiot.

What was all this ?

But even those options,
and that question,
doesn't quite
get it, doesn't quite
do it the good
it needs.

Made an Angel Maker

Perhaps we can believe
the story about the dog,
but I doubt it.

You have to warm to the idea of
a 'made-up life story', where
you make up your own background, your
own biography – all of it – to promote
some idea of yourself.
You can ignore facts of any sort, and just use
words entirely
in your own favour.
But this can bring its own problems:
do you fashion your story to
make yourself look good, or
do you fashion it to your advantage ? The
two are not one and the same, although
the beginner might think so
at the time.

So apparently
it was only when they got back
to their temporary accommodation
- somewhere or the other in London (?) -
that daddy and daughter realised
- from the way it stumbled about -
that the rescue puppy
they had just adopted (and signed for)
– at the dogs' home –
only had three legs.

‘He used to beat me,’ she said,
‘I hated my fucking father’
before then quickly adding
‘Sorry Dad’
in case he was listening to her from
the great heavenly ‘beyond’.
Then she handed me a gilt-framed photograph
of a tall and handsome horsey-nosed grey-haired man
– honestly not far off a film star in good looks –
standing in front of a yacht
set against a blue sky.
Now you can see, she said,
pointing to her face, where
I got my Roman nose.

A few months after that
- in debt as always -
she spent fifty pounds
of the rent money she owed me
- borrowed off a so-called friend -
for a massive multicolour
‘Daddy’ tattoo
across her right shoulder.
‘Love you Daddy’ it read
in fat swirly nursery kiddie lettering,
presumably hoping he could somehow
see it.
It’s just occurred to me that
maybe he could, and that
he was probably
still alive somewhere, just
around the corner.

Most likely
everything was nothing,
and that there was
no three-legged pooch, and
no yacht marina, and maybe
not even a ‘dead beating daddy’ (!) -
though the daddy tattoo
looked to be real enough.
(Maybe only a stick-on ?)

She’s still out there, somewhere.
And somehow.

So, with everything else
burnt off and yet gone, vanished,
she still had an excellent
everyday ‘cunning’ which
would get this everyday super
cunning cunt well though
everything else. And
probably much better than
could I, at my best
of times.

Corregidor, & two +

Richard was a permanent member
of our Thursday group, there
every week without fail,
(more or less)
and a better attendee than me,
but there you go.
I referred to him shockingly, mockingly
as 'Richard the Jew', but
the restaurant staff
described him – somewhat dismissively - as
'The Indian'
on account of his sun-darkened complexion,
which I hadn't given a second thought to,
at least, not before
hearing them call him that.
Well, as it turned out
Richard the Indian Jew,
balding but youthful, touchy and
ever sensitive to
real or imagined slight; and
stout defender of all things Jewish,
was more than a little bit
deaf.

He claimed it was just
a deliberately selective
hard-of-hearing,
and that he could hear exactly what
he wanted to, whenever he needed to,
as well as ignore whatever he didn't

like the sound of.
I believe him.
There was good evidence to back it up,
And I often saw it with my own ears
eyes.

I once hummed him a famous tune
- Nessun Dorma, as it happens -
and he couldn't identify it,
despite his being
a musicologist for a living, with a
big fucking fat book
on Mahler to his name.
So obviously it was all about
my bad humming, and
wrong notes,
and poor pitch, and
nothing to do with his
poor hearing.
I asked him about the different versions
of Nessun
– with their different endings –
and he said he wasn't
interested in football.

Was he deaf ?
Maybe.
What do you need, then, to be deaf ?
What are the necessary prerequisites ?
More to the point, what do you need
to offer night classes in music appreciation ?
Other than a room full of eager
old ladies with plenty of time

on their hands, and
some sort of a professional-looking
digital sound system.

So ?
So what ?
you could say.
So good luck to him, then.
I agree.
Yes but he also writes
lengthy reviews
for the reputable
music magazines I read.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jakob Zaaiman is an artist and writer living in London. He writes prose fiction as well as poetry, and he likes to create works that defy easy explanation. He has also written extensively on modern contemporary art.

Other works:

GHOST QUEEN (Prose Short Stories)
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TOM & the THUMBSCREWS

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Second volume of poetry for those who detest poetry because it always seems to involve flowery and arcane language while never saying anything remotely significant or interesting.

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